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# A DELICATE PRESENCE: THE QUEER INTIMACY OF DRAWING

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The focus of this paper is on exploring the delicate position that drawing can inhabit, between absence and presence. The paper unpicks the value of delicacy to uncover a web of tensions between the seen-unseen, touching-not-touching and crucially, absence and presence. This 'delicacy' in drawing is then critically repositioned through the lens of recent writing from the field of feminist science studies to explore the possibility of a new critical position *vis-a-vis* discourse of presence in drawing. The significance for us is that through looking at drawing we become sensitised to the possibility of other states of being, which in turn may offer fresh lenses through which to see the world. Equally, in co-opting new forms of critical discourse from other fields of thought might we enrich our understanding of graphic encounters?

## INTRODUCTION

This paper takes a critical look at the fragile presence manifest in the value of delicacy in drawing. Delicacy remains one of the poetic, aesthetic and psychological qualities closely allied with the history of drawing yet despite these widespread associations, delicacy as an aesthetic and critical phenomenon has remained largely underexplored. The paper unpicks the value of delicacy to uncover a web of tensions between the seen-unseen, touching-not-touching and crucially, absence and presence. Delicacy in this respect is presented as a linchpin, a liminal space, between opposing forces and qualities. The possibility for drawing to open up space between presence and absence is explored through feminist materialist theory, specifically Karen Barad's idea of 'queer intimacy,' a theory of relationship based on quantum physics' predictions of simultaneous absence and presence. In borrowing critical discourse from other fields of thought, might we enrich our understanding of graphic encounters? Conversely, might drawing offer a means to become sensitised to the possibility of other states of being, which in turn may offer fresh lenses through which to see the world?

## THE DELICACY OF DRAWING

Delicacy is a slippery concept, implying intricacy and the condition of being light, fragile, perhaps requiring close concentration. Etymologically, it comes from the Latin '*delicere*' to allure and entice, in other words to attract and draw close. It can never mean to grasp or fix, only to allure, and so is perpetually precarious. In being so, delicacy is ultimately concerned with engagement, either through physical proximity and handling, or simply looking at with an external object, another person or thing. Like beauty, it is rarely, if ever, used to refer to oneself, being typically used to refer to an object of (personal) interest, or desire. It is therefore a quality of a presence of another, but an other which is faint, unfixed and contingent. Not entirely absent, nor entirely present. Delicacy is therefore closely and intricately bound up in discourse around drawing and presence, notably through ideas of trace, touching and relationship.

Ruskin talks about drawing as a kind of 'dirtying the paper delicately' (Farthing, 2005). This phrase refers to the activity of drawing, presenting it as a purposeful, often gentle, touch, performing a somehow abrasive, damaging or dirtying effect, which in turn is pleasing or valued. This idea of drawing as a kind of rupture or damage has been commented upon elsewhere; our word to 'sketch' stems from the ancient Greek '*skariphasthai*' meaning simultaneously to sketch and to scarify (Kingston, 2000, np). For Ruskin, the emphasis is not so much on this damage but that the mode of application of pigment to the surface should be delicate. By this he refers to the pressure and accuracy of the marking tool as it makes inscriptive contact with the surface. He returns to this tenet on several occasions to underscore it. He asserts that the principle aim of his teaching of drawing is to obtain, 'to

the utmost of the pupil's power, a delicate method of work' (Ruskin, 1997, pp.14-15). Delicacy is a skill and measure of the virtuosity of the maker (Ruskin 1997, p.13; Cotter 2012, p.23). Likewise, John Berger's appreciation of Watteau's drawing centres around the delicacy of touch indicating an acute sensitivity to the visible world: 'So delicate, so tentative, that they almost appear to be done in secret; as though he were drawing a butterfly that had alighted on a leaf in front of him and was frightened that the movement or noise of the chalk on the paper would scare it away' (Berger, 2007, p.39). He praises delicacy of drawing in capturing the 'change, transience and brevity of each moment' in the world around him.

In 1979, Brice Marden described his own interaction with the page in drawing thus: 'the hand touches more delicately in Drawing. There is less between the hand and the image than in any other media. Drawing is fine and concise; Drawing is graceful' (Marden, 1979, p.56). Drawing here is intimate, carefully made and, as for Ruskin, touching is of particular significance; the 'delicacy' found here is about the way that the point comes into contact with the page, how the paper is to be touched (Ruskin, 1997, p.26). More recently, this tactile sensitivity has been emphasised more directly by Tony Godfrey who presumes that drawing 'requires a gentle touch and calls for intimacy with the viewer' (Godfrey, 2000, np).

These examples appear to echo the values expressed by Ruskin, making drawing contingent upon an intimate touch that is calm, graceful, gentle and precise. They refer to the activity of making a drawing, the kinetics of it. However, delicacy is also inferred in the visual and material qualities of drawings and the conditions under which they are made. For example, Drawing can be made with a point, or a line, the most fine, insubstantial units of an image. There is also the material fragility of the supports commonly used in traditional drawing (e.g. paper), which has rendered them subject to special conservational measures. These material conditions can be coded as positive; the care viewing demands contributes to constructing a kind of aura of drawings. A recent exhibition devoted itself to this very theme arguing: 'what is most compelling about works of art on paper: their inherent fragility and their particular brand of quiet intimacy' (Powell, 2009, p.vi). While we may disagree with Powell about fragility being necessarily inherent -not all drawings are made on paper or a similarly vulnerable support – the associations that attach to these materials prompt artists to adopt them in their drawing when seeking to convey the delicate.

## A GHOSTLY MEDIUM

Delicacy is also found in the perception and understanding of drawing. This ranges from claims about drawing's perceived intimacy to associations with the evanescent to values of uniqueness and privacy. For instance, drawings, as first thoughts visualising ideas, are associated with the elusive. Louise Bourgeois called her drawings 'pensées plumes,'

feather thoughts (Morris, 2007, p.104; Bernadac and Wye, 1999, p.73). This suggests drawings to be something light, barely there or barely fixed, capturing something lightweight that may slip away. Deanna Petherbridge echoes this idea that “an engendering sketch has to be accomplished quickly because of the instability, incoherence and fleeting quality of conceptual images which hover on the edges of consciousness like pale ghosts floating away if approached too deliberately” (Petherbridge, 2010, p.49). This reminds us of Berger’s simile of the butterfly and Watteau’s drawing with its sense of something that might be easily disturbed and lost. Similar ideas are observed by Brian Dillon who identifies in drawings ‘a delicate vagueness’ and ‘a ghostly medium’ (Dillon, 2009, p.12, p.8).

These examples articulate the tentative and provisional in drawing when used as a means of working out ideas. It is the process of coming into being that is valued, the ability to perch on the edge of being and not being. When he claims that drawing has ‘a privileged relation to the non-visible’ (Newman, 2003, pp.95-96), Michael Newman highlights drawing’s ability to make tangible or visible unseen ideas, valuing drawing as a means for seeing the otherwise unknown and bringing it into being, positioning it as somehow able to traverse the boundary between the visible and the invisible worlds. This position recalls Klee’s philosophy of art, more recently popularised through the writing of Deleuze and Guattari (Ambrose, 2009, p.112). Colin Eisler goes as far as to describe the draughtsman’s achievement as one ‘verging on the mystical’ (Eisler, 1975, p.10). It is a discipline on a threshold.

This same sense of threshold is also often articulated in relation to the creative space of the artist’s thoughts. Norman Bryson talks of drawing performing ‘an interlacing of outside and inside’ (Bryson, 2003, p.154): as the drawing evolves, the maker externalises internal thoughts, the emerging drawing being the linchpin between the two. This understanding of the making process is widespread and expressed in values brought to the spectatorship of drawings. Completed drawings are often regarded as clues to the making process providing an ‘intimate connection to the maker’s hand’ or ‘special access to the mind’ or even a ‘cartography of the soul’ (Kantor, 2005, p.37; Barañano, 2002, p.14). As such, it appears that what is really being described here goes beyond the physical drawing process. It is about making a connection with the maker himself or herself through a trace present in the drawn image. The drawn image is presented as a manifestation of thought and a bridge between mind and hand. As Suzanne Cotter puts it ‘drawings are generally considered to be an artist’s most intimate act’ (Cotter, 2001, p.7). In other words, drawings draw the spectator in to an intimate space, they allure, entice.

Drawing framed in this way emerges as an activity valued for its touching, proximity, contact and is enmeshed with ideas of desire. Indeed it may not be too much to claim that

it is often couched in terms otherwise reserved for the erotic or sensual. These deep undercurrents of sensuality permeate John Berger's account of his communication with a young woman through drawing (Berger, 2007, p.45). But we need not look so far as these anecdotal personal narratives to tender this claim. Even the much cited myth of the origins of drawing is rooted in a romantic tale of a lost lover - the drawing is born though an attempt to preserve the presence of an object of desire (Petherbridge, 2010, p.21; Newman, 2003, p.93). In drawing one is mitigating loss, grasping for something that feels beyond, in an attempt to preserve the ephemeral.

This fear of loss is at the core of delicacy (surely without interest in the preservation, the delicate is merely fragile?) and consequently the delicacy manifest in drawing in the attempt to preserve. But preservation through drawing is perhaps fatally flawed. To cite Michael Newman, "*Drawing, with each stroke, re-enacts desire and loss. Its peculiar mode of being lies between the withdrawal of the trace in the mark and the presence of the idea it prefigures*" (Newman, 2003, p.95). As the drawing emerges, something else slips away. What we draw is not the thing itself. As Magritte firmly reminds us in his 'Treachery of Images' (1928-9), 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe.' The drawing created is both a thing in itself and a trace of an absent other. The activity of drawing, put in this way, is an ebb and flow between the present and absent. We could see drawing as a 'switch,' a point of exchange between these two conditions but put like this a definitive rupture or break is suggested. The sense however is more of a space in which this exchange or switch occurs. A liminal and unfixed space which is neither one thing or another, on the cusp of the two.

So drawings at large, in their creation, ultimately address states of being and not being. In drawing, the drawer is bringing something into being, giving presence to an idea, making visible the invisible, the thought, the idea, and inscribing it into the world. The drawing both has a presence of its own, and invokes the presence of an absent other: it is both, paradoxically, present and absent. For these reasons many artists turn to drawing to articulate ideas of the indeterminate, transient or ephemeral.

At this point I should point out that, of course, not all of these qualities apply to all drawings all of the time. It goes without saying that the unequivocal and direct are equally valued in drawing. We should avoid being seduced into accepting these pronouncements on drawing as either inherent or incidental. Rather, as values in drawing they are qualities actively sought by artists to articulate experience. A classic example of this might be Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning drawing* (1953) in which the artist purposefully sets out to use processes of erasure and concealment as the positive tools of image making. The materially insubstantial by no means indicates an image lacking in power. Artists select techniques and refine their skills to enable these qualities of delicacy to emerge. For instance, the gestural marks of Sally Taylor as she seeks to capture the sounds and sense of fleeting conversation in rapidly scrawled marks and daubs; the visible touch of the artist's tool on fragile paper in a Sian Bowen drawing communicating the sense of touching

a fragile museum artefact hidden away for years. In the former we have a sense of a demonstrative presence but one rapidly passing by, in the latter an object or feeling which hovers tantalizingly out of reach. In both the success is contingent upon the palpable tension between what is present and what is not.

In drawing and amongst artists, this capacity for coexistence of two seemingly mutually exclusive positions is readily accepted. Yet when we transport the logic into the world of objects and matter, things are more problematic – how can a cup, or book, or desk both exist and not exist?

## A QUEER INTIMACY WITH PHYSICS

This is the problem addressed by the feminist materialist scholar Karen Barad (Barad, 2007, p.155; 2012, p.209). Initially trained as a physicist, she is now a widely published academic in the field of science studies whose theories about matter and relationship have shaken up both the physics community as well as philosophies of science. Her work has recently begun to have influence in the arts, for instance on the well-established residency programme at Wysing Arts.

Barad's core interest is that of relationship, and the possibility for relationship with entities beyond our grasp, themes, as I've outlined above, that resonate closely with drawing. Given the overlapping concerns, it is compelling to ask how might these theories help articulate the absent presence in drawing? Or, moreover, what might drawing be able to contribute to these timely critical debates spanning an interdisciplinary research community?

Barad's writing on relationship centres on the idea of fuzzy boundaries. That one thing is not absolutely distinct from another. There is no absolute, just 'grey' areas of possibility where either position might exist. This philosophy draws on quantum field theory which, in basic terms for us non-physicists, proposes that electrons are not fixed in a particular position, they can be in a potential state, where they might be in multiple positions, a state of what I am going to call 'fuzzy oscillation' being in neither one position or another. I recognise the physics is complicated – and far beyond my own grasp – but what we need to take from this is the ability to envisage a state of openness.

Perhaps another way to conceive of it is to turn to Barad's own account, in which she uses the example of a drawn line – a subject with which we are on more familiar ground (Barad, 2007, p. 156)<sup>1</sup>. She critiques the mechanism of sight, proposing that we see through differentiating one thing from another, through mentally drawing lines around things and naming them. This position of absolute division is problematic for Barad. To paraphrase her

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Duke University Press Agential Realism, 2007), p.156.

argument: take a line. It divides two spaces. But look really closely, on a microscopic level, where are the edges of the line? She points out that “it is a well recognised fact of physical optics that if one looks closely at an ‘edge’ what one sees is not a sharp boundary between light and dark but rather a series of light and dark bands – that is, a diffraction pattern” (Barad, 2007, p.156). In other words, the line itself becomes a space, a no-man’s territory between one quality and the other. It is this space that Barad explores through her theory of queer intimacy.

For example, her paper ‘On touching: the inhuman that therefore I am’ considers both measurement and chemical reactions as a form of touching (Barad, 2012, p.206). She asks what at the quantum level is touching? Where is it? And what exactly are we touching when we touch? This argument is advanced using the example of ‘virtual particles,’ which she describes as “ghostly non/existences that teeter on the edge of the infinitely fine blade between being and not being” (Barad, 2012, p.209). These are particles, which ‘flash’ in and out of being as electrons exchange virtual photons, or put simply, interact with what is around them. The basic concept is that as these particle ‘touch’ they move between one type of matter and another, they have a transient existence. She terms it a ‘queer intimacy’, referring to the fact that these virtual particles belong to either one form of matter or another (Barad, 2012, p.213). They are both of the thing (present) and other (absent). She reminds us that the sense touching is in fact nothing more than an electromagnetic force, and when we touch, we don’t in fact touch the object, we simply feel the effects of the force. Consequently we are exposed to a position of indeterminacy between self and the other that is touched. In doing so she troubles the boundary of absent and present: “Indeterminacy is an un/doing that unsettles the very foundations of non/being” (Barad, 2012, p.214). Or to put it more simply, indeterminacy creates a space where we can’t be sure if a thing is or is not, where presence and absence co-exist. To return to the metaphor of the drawn line – the point which is neither one side nor the other.

Queer intimacy therefore proposes a space ‘between,’ an oscillating and unfixed interstice between ideas and matter; a space where relationships remain contingent, ideas and matter provisional. What is radical about Barad’s thinking is that it embraces the possibility for a form of open-ended existence not conceivable in classical physics; for us that means a space caught between opposing and even contradictory forces that matter inhabits that doesn’t tally with our everyday understanding of matter in the world, how we might touch things, how we see things. But this is not a position of fear or anxiety of the unknown. What Barad is pointing to is the opportunity to think and use technology differently. More pertinently for us, she suggests that practice and poetics may offer useful critical tools for thinking:

*I find myself drawn to poetics as a mode of expression, not in order to move away from thinking rigorously but, on the contrary, to lure us towards the possibilities of*



*engaging the force of imagination in its materiality. The force of imagination puts us in touch with the possibilities for sensing the insensible, the indeterminate (Barad, 2012, p.216).*

## OF MATTER TO DRAWING

What is significant, and controversial, about Barad's approach to theorizing relationship, absence and presence is her use of physics to propose a general conception of relationship, of interaction and touching, one which embraces the poetics of materials and practice. To take the liberty of applying it to drawing, this 'fuzzy oscillation' could be particularly useful to understanding potential latent in drawing, a medium beset with paradoxes and tensions in status, definition, form and use; even delineating an image on a page necessarily involves negotiating light and shade, visibility and invisibility and engagement with states of being and not being.

However, perhaps we might also read Barad as a call to arms. As I have outlined above, drawing has a peculiar capacity for encompassing these polar opposites, for implying absence via presence and vice versa. Many drawings seek to offer the viewer multivalency where images and meanings flicker in and out of relationship, entering our consciousness without a need to be fixed into rigid descriptive forms. Reading Barad through the lens of drawing, the possibility emerges to enrich our understanding of graphic encounters, sharpen and refine our language and add substance and definition to what we understand to be delicacy and how it might be used. But more significantly, Drawing presents itself as a means with which to work through these ideas of indeterminacy, a non-linear, non-verbal language in which meaning and matter can slip between the cracks, retaining a provisionality that words cannot.

Finally we should recognise that ultimately Barad is concerned with 'mattering' and we may well ask as she does, why does this matter? Her argument is rooted in ethical concerns about human relationships with 'matter,' the world, (Barad, 2012, p.219). It seems obvious that delicacy is not a concept unique to the making and consumption of artworks. But if through drawing and looking at drawings we can become sensitive to delicacy in other forms of lived experience, sensitised to other in-between, possible states of existence, might drawing then help us conceive of inhabiting indeterminate states of being?

So while Barad's thinking offers drawing critical tools to better examine aesthetic value, drawing offers a tool, a means with which to think through these possibilities of liminal states and contribute to this timely interdisciplinary discourse of what it means to simply be.



## POSTSCRIPT

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